

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the **Corporate Parenting Panel** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Friday 18 February 2022** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Simmons (Chair)

Members of the Panel:

Councillors M Walton (Vice-Chair), R Adcock-Forster, B Bainbridge, J Charlton, B Coult, S Deinali, C Fletcher, C Hunt, J Miller, K Robson, K Rooney and C Varty

Co-Opted Members:

A Ferguson, W Taylor and C Gray and L Joseph representing the Children in Care Council

Also Present:

Laura Armstrong – Professional Practice Manager
Jane Ayres - Strategic Manager for Children and Families
Laura Counce – Service Manager, Children and Young People’s Service
Kelsey Clayton – Legal Services Manager
Sharon Davey - Operations Manager, Children and Young People’s Service
Helen Ferguson - Head of Children’s Social Care
Robert Johnson – Project Manager, Investing in Children
Claire Morris – Strategic Manager, Looked After Children Resources
Fiona Smith – Operations Manager, One Point Service
Martyn Stenton - Head of Early Help, Inclusion and Vulnerable Children
Melanie Stubbs – Head of the Virtual School
Jayne Watson – Senior Partnerships Officer

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bell, Griffiths, Gunn, Henderson, Hood, Roberts and Townsend and from co-opted members Chris Baines and Julie Bell.

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Surtees was present as substitute for Councillor Roberts.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2022 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

Under matters arising, in relation to agenda item 10, it was reported that further information on support for care leavers had been circulated to the Panel for information, following the meeting.

4 Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

5 Number of Looked After Children

The Head of Children's Social Care informed the Panel that the number of children looked after stood at 956 which was an increase on the figure reported in January. This increase followed recent changes to caselaw which had resulted in delays to adoption proceedings. It is expected that the increase will be temporary whilst the changes are implemented.

6 Ofsted Updates

The Panel noted no new Ofsted reports had been published since the last meeting.

Updating on other matters, the Head of Children's Social Care referred to the discussion at the last meeting regarding the foster carer recruitment campaign and highlighted that an advertising hoarding had been installed at the entrance to County Hall, to advertise Durham County Council's fostering service. In addition, TV adverts will be aired at the end of February and in May, to further support the recruitment campaign.

The Panel noted that a report on the national Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse which will include Durham County Council's response, will be considered by the Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March. A progress update on issues pertaining to the Corporate Parenting Panel will be provided in due course.

7 Proud Moments

The Strategic Manager for Looked After Children Resources shared proud moments from an event which took place at a Children's Home which had recently benefited from a bathroom refurbishment. The young people were so happy with their new bathroom facilities that they arranged an official opening event to celebrate.

The event included a ceremonial ribbon-cutting, handing over of the ceremonial 'toilet roll' and a tea party. Staff were proud at the effort the young people had made and they were pleased to see how much they value their home, which emphasises how important it is that the young people are provided with the highest quality facilities possible.

8 Investing in Children / Children in Care Council Update

The Chair introduced Rob Johnson, Project Manager for Investing in Children and Caitlyn and Luke from the Children in Care Council. Members welcomed Luke to his first meeting, saying they were looking forward to working with him and hearing his feedback. The Chair was pleased to report that Mitchell is now studying at University and he was thanked for all his hard work and support.

Caitlyn and Luke delivered a presentation, highlighting the work of the two CiCC meetings held during January (for copy see file of minutes).

- Meetings were held with the younger and older groups and both groups agreed on the CiCC's expectations for 2022. Further information on the expectations will be shared with the Panel in the future.
- The younger group is focusing on the 'all about me' photography project and they are looking at ways to present information about the key messages of the project to a future meeting of the Panel.
- The young people are continuing to deliver awareness raising sessions to Sunderland University social work students.
- Work is ongoing on the Full Circle therapy room enhancements, with workshops scheduled to take place during half term.
- Care leavers had reviewed the local offer to inform future strategic planning and they requested that Members continue to promote the local offer.
- The young people had discussed ideas for their involvement in Durham County Council's City of Culture bid. Suggestions had included the creation of a Time Capsule to be opened in 2075, an idea which the young people would very much like Members to support. Caitlyn explained that the time capsule would chronicle current events and include young people's experiences, which may be particularly poignant due to the recent pandemic. The young people expressed that they would like to connect their heritage with the Council's vision for the future.

The Project Manager for Investing in Children explained the idea materialised through discussions with partners at Durham University. Whilst the hope is that the bid will be successful, the young people feel this project would be of benefit, irrespective of whether the bid is successful.

Members spoke in support of the Time Capsule 2075 proposal and Councillor Surtees suggested that the young people may wish to explore links with Durham History Centre, to help to develop their ideas.

Councillor Walton referred to the local offer and asked what more the young people would like to see done, to enhance the offer. The Head of Children's Social Care explained that a group of young people had worked with Strategic Managers to investigate how Durham's local offer compares with other regions. They found that Durham has a strong offer and compares favourably, however, they identified five actions that could be introduced to enhance the offer. One of the suggestions was to look at the possibility of enabling a friend to accompany the young person to gym / leisure activities as many young people would feel happier participating in these activities if they were accompanied by a friend and this would also help to combat loneliness. Further information on this work will be provided at a future meeting of the Panel.

Councillor Miller referred to a local history event taking place within his division and commented on the local history resources available within communities which Members could help the young people to access. He also extended an invite to the young people to visit the heritage centre in Wheatley Hill.

9 Place Based Approach to Early Help for Children and Families in Durham

The Panel received a report and presentation from the Operations Manager, One Point Service which provided an update on the place based approach to early help for children and families (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Operations Manager explained the approach is underpinned by the national Supporting Families Programme, known in Durham as Stronger Families, which offers support to all children, young people and their families in County Durham, not only those who are looked after. The Panel noted that Durham's approach is a multi-agency approach, based on 'whole' family working which empowers families and builds resilience.

Describing the work, the Operations Manager commented that in 2020 local Early Help Conversations were developed in each team area, using local data to understand the geographical area. The Panel heard how the new Team Around the Schools model recognises individual needs of schools and pupils within their communities. Support is given at the earliest opportunity through Reducing Parental Conflict Working Groups and by helping families to tackle poverty, which can have a major impact on child development. The Operations Manager also highlighted that prevention and early help forums were being re-established, following the pandemic.

The Operations Manager spoke of the importance of engaging service users and taking their feedback into account. In the future, work will continue with partners and service users to better understand the early help needs of families in order to influence service delivery.

Councillor Charlton referred to the Team Around the Schools model and asked if this was available to all schools. The Operations Manager explained that this was a pilot project at Windlestone School and that a steering group had been established to identify and target priority areas, based upon national guidelines. It is hoped to extend the model across the county in the future.

Councillor Varty noted how unfortunate it was that so many children and their families needed this help, but commended the good work being done to provide help at the very earliest opportunity, in this unsettling time for many families.

Councillor Walton referred to the early help forums and asked how they are accessed. The Operations Manager replied that three forums are held per year, to correspond with school terms. Work is underway to update mailing lists to ensure partner representation is appropriate and that communities are well represented.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

10 Children Looked After with a Disability Annual Update

The Panel received a report and presentation delivered by the Strategic Manager for Children and Families and the Professional Practice Manager, which provided a summary of the support available for children and young people and their families by the Children with Disabilities Service (for copy of report and presentation see file).

The Panel noted that since the Ofsted inspection in September 2019, there had been significant changes to the service, including additional investment in front line staff, the creation of a 0-18 children's service and a transition navigation service which works with disabled young people aged between 14–25 to smooth their transition from children's to adult services.

Officers explained the emphasis on the young person's voice when describing their everyday experiences. The Panel viewed a short video clip showing how the Mind of My Own Express App works. The app allows young people to create a profile page and to share their thoughts directly with those that care for them.

Officers informed the Panel how the culture of the service aims to promote good relationships with the young people and their families and strives to maintain the same social worker throughout. Feedback tools had been developed and comments from young people include that their social worker is fun, that they feel reassured by the stability through maintaining the same social worker and they appreciate the opportunities they are given to gain their independence, whilst knowing their social work is there for support. Carers have reported that team members are kind and offer guidance to other avenues of support in instances where a child does not meet the criteria.

Councillor Walton was pleased to see the service is very much led by suggestions for improvements from the young people, their families and carers and asked what challenges this posed. The Strategic Manager explained that one of the main challenges is the development of direct work with young people with communication difficulties, to ensure their true voices, wishes and feelings are heard. She added that there had been a good response to the app, however it is accepted that it is not suitable for all and work was continuing to develop the app.

Councillor Bainbridge asked for information on caseloads. The Strategic Manager explained that caseloads were difficult to quantify as some young people have an allocated family support worker and a review and monitor service is also in operation, however, she offered to provide further information to Councillor Bainbridge after the meeting.

Councillor Coult asked whether the young people are provided with IT facilities to access the app. The Service Manager responded that the Express App is accessed through a social worker's account and whilst the Mind of My Own One App may be accessed independently by the young person, the young people in the Children and Disabilities Team use the Express App, alongside their workers.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

11 Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service

The Panel received the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service presented by the Operations Manager which provided an update on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service in supporting and challenging the work of Children's Social Care.

All children and young people that become looked after must have an IRO appointed. The service seeks to ensure that children in care and foster care reviews are timely and carried out in the best interests of the child. The service works hard to help young people and their carers to understand how children in care reviews work and an information video, produced with young people of the Children in Care Council (CiCC), was shown at the meeting, which is also available on the CiCC website.

Members commented that the video was useful, informative and young person-friendly. Councillor Walton asked if the video was shown to all children looked after. The Operations Manager responded that the aim is to show the video to all young people coming into care at their IRO placement visit which takes place before the first formal meeting.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

12 Any other business

The Chair announced that Claire Morris, Strategic Manager for Looked After Children Resources was leaving the authority and the Panel thanked Claire her for all her hard work and wished her well for the future.

13 Exclusion of the public

Resolved:

That under Section 100(a)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely discussion of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

14 Regulation 44 Visits and Regulatory Body Ratings of Children's Residential Homes

The Panel considered the report of the Head of Children's Social Care which provided a monthly update on Regulation 44 visits and regulatory body ratings (for copy see file of minutes).

Councillor Hunt volunteered to undertake Regulation 44 visits at the new children's home, The Manse at Coxhoe.

Resolved:

That the report be received.